DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 213 005 CS 206 684

AUTHOR Meyers, Lewis
TITLE The Argument for a Culture of Literacy in the Writing Classroom.
PUB DATE Dec 81
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the International Conference on Language Problems and Public Policy (Cancun, Mexico, December 16-19, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Behavior Standards; Black Dialects; *Classroom Environment; Cultural Context; Cultural Differences; Higher Education; Language Usage; Language Variation; *Literacy; *Literature Appreciation; Social Behavior; *Teaching Methods; *Values; *Writing Instruction; Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

A student's belief in the value of literacy is essential to effective teaching and successful learning, but can result only from a local culture whose aim is to produce literacy. The social identity and cultural norms of the young are registered in their use of language, and if literacy, as defined by others, calls the norms and identity into question, the gap between them and standard English will not be bridged. Teachers must understand that the contexts in which students revert to nonstandard English signal a disbelief in the value of literacy that interferes with the writing process. To generate a culture of literacy in the classroom that would stimulate a belief in the value of literacy, teachers should introduce materials that become the only context or experience from which the students write. Writing tasks could result from fragmenting or isolating a single literary work. Value placed on a piece of literature and its language creates a miniature culture of literacy. (HOD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED213005

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

THE ARGUMENT FOR A CULTURE OF LITERACY IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

Lewis Meyers

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Lewis Meyers
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

"Can't you remember that?"
"I'll remember it when I believe it."
- Raymond Chandler
The Lady in the Lake

My title employs two ambiguous terms which, before attempting anything else, I must define singly and then explain in conjunction. Literacy I hold to be not only the ability to read and write, but that ability as it is measured by social needs and cultural expectations whose reality is attested to by authoritative sources within a society.[1] Culture is a set of beliefs and practices that both evidence and help form cohesion among the members of a particular social group. I broadly distinguish a culture of literacy from the more familiar reference to a literate culture in the following way. A literate culture, as a sociological construct, includes literacy among various other, already formed traits distributed grossly among a given populace. A culture of literacy refers to an active, participant-based enterprise; it is organic, pursuing literate ends as those in process of becoming and as belonging to its members equally.

To further distinguish the two concepts, we should think of a culture of literacy as being more easily located among a smaller group of people, such as the twenty or so members of a writing class. A literate culture, on the other hand,

CS206168

seems to apply only to entities as large as nation states, though it may devolve from them onto particular communities and vary in degree according to subculture. The distinction is an important one, I think, because in calling attention to what happens in the classroom as opposed to what is the state of the union, it makes us focus on the one place where teachers may act and where literacy is tested several times weekly.

The test is not solely of the application of skills. The classroom is the logical place to discover what value students place on literacy and the effect their valuation has on learning ability. I assume that effect to be significant, and I intend to show the value to be not much in evidence. This I will do by investigating the phenomenon of belief, which is a measure of valuation as well as a means of projecting value. The points I want to make are, (1) that a student's belief in the value of literacy is essential to effective teaching and thus to successful learning, and, (2) that such belief can only be the outcome of a local culture whose express aim is to produce it. No more than the value of literacy, however, do I consider the culture that may embed it to be the case in most writing classrooms. But this assumption is one we must examine. It is rare that anyone makes an explicit declaration of belief or disbelief in the value of literacy. The cultural detective must therefore rely on discovering clues that betray one of these states, belief or disbelief, in order to show that the other does not exist or is losing out.

It should be possible to reveal students' valuation of literacy and the effects of that on learning by going directly to what they, the students, say out loud and put in writing. I have selected a few samples for this purpose, the first of which may help put the others in perspective. It is a remark made by a former student of mine when I advised him to avoid euphemisms in his compositions. "You want us to be authors!" he said simply. I would elaborate on his meaning as follows: the requirement to make conscious verbal discriminations exposes writing for what it is, a specialty; it is like blowing glass or tasting wine, something that relatively few people can be expected to master. Now, I think this attitude toward writing is significant, the more so the more widespread it is. For along with the decline of verbal abilities nationwide, it allows us to project a gradual elevation to ideal achievement of minimal competence in writing.[2] More and more of what has long been assumed to be well within the range of anyone learning to write expository prose may disappear from the curriculum. Writing will cease to be recognized as a normal cultural activity (specialties are elite functions); and literacy, as the value which justifies that activity, will no longer be considered a possible or legitimate social end for most Americans.

To avoid this state of affairs, it is first necessary to recall that the majority of people resist unjust impositions on their lives. If literate values seem implausible and

writing well an eccentrically defined obligation, students will resist learning as just such an imposition. This resistance, which I fear is ubiquitous at present, sets up obstacles that teachers obviously must overcome. I should say, however, that open challenges by students to writing as a vocationally impractical activity, or avoidance by absenteeism--to give two examples of student denial of value--pose lesser problems, simply because they are overt, than the resistance which students are unaware of in themselves and that teachers, equally unaware, habitually misread as reflexive learning or language behavior. On one level, it is that, of course. But we miss much if we see whatever negative response students make to writing instruction only as a source of technical problems to be solved on their own level of difficulty or slight misunderstandings that restored communications will clear up. In actuality, such behavior is the very clue that uncovers the true dimensions of our students' crisis of belief, and it must be read as such. To do so, I will consider two kinds of students, both native speakers: those learning English as a second dialect (ESD), and those whose spoken language is more or less standard (SE).

Many ESD students, trusting their ear implicitly, respond to grammatical correction by saying--often, if not always, in so many words--that "it don't sound right to me." I take this admission--which, I trust, has a familiar ring to most of us--very seriously. One should not overlook the

embarrassed smile or helpless shrug so frequently accompanying it, but one must look further than these gestures to the stubborn resolve such students show by their words to stick to habitual language contexts. This resolve is no less (and perhaps more) stubborn for being automatic rather than meditated; it vies for prominence with outright disbelief in standard English versions given as corrections. Paradoxically, however, ESD students also know they are distant from certain writing conventions--even the very ones that sound false to them--and they know they are expected to make up that distance. But it is the way they measure it, as it exists between accustomed contexts and ones they are unused to, that is important and that is the key to our understanding the depth of their learning difficulties.

To illustrate this way of measuring, we can examine the competing terms "negative concord" and "double negative." The former belongs to descriptivists' meta-language and asserts, by implying intentionality, the autonomy of a non-standard dialect like Black English; the latter, a traditional term used by many teachers and virtually all students (those who are aware of the phenomenon), denies such autonomy by implying that, in this case at least, redundancy is inadvertent. As a usage which is not a feature of a stable subsystem, but rather is one that works from within to disrupt the stability of the main system, it is an "error." No doubt, too few teachers reject this notion by impressing on their

students the linguistic equivalence of dialects. But even those who do find ESD students continuing to view such non-standard usages as errors--a falling away from ideal practice--not as dialectal radii leading from the same center. So let me inquire: what would we, any of us, do about errors we made every time we opened our mouths? I consider it a fair expectation that I learn how to do things that I have never done before; but the expectation changes if I am asked, for instance, to learn how to do the things left-handed which I have done right-handed all my life. And the expectation is more suspect if I become convinced that right-handedness is "wrong," and that I have therefore been in error for as long as I can remember. It is simpler just to go on being wrong; it's certainly more comfortable than its ethical alternative. And this choice, I suggest, is the one many ESD students must struggle against making. If, however, they do make it and settle for what they are used to, they implicitly state their disbelief in the value of an opposite imperative at the same time that they grant its correctness.

At issue here are the social identity and cultural norms that language both registers and helps to create. These are the dimensions of belief. If literacy as defined by others calls that identity and those norms into question, the distance from standard English will be maintained despite the student's best intentions and the teacher's best efforts. Whether the symbolic statements of students, such as "it don't

sound right to me," cease to be made or continue to be heard, it is the magnetism of those original and inveterate contexts to which such statements draw our attention and in which language has its more credible daily uses that is dangerous; and it is from within those contexts that writing will be seen to be outside the pale and beyond belief.[3]

But such helpless disbelief in the value of literacy is endemic among SE as well as ESD students. I can best show this to be the case by pointing to student texts in which such stock phrases as "in today's society," "the modern world," "the minority," and so on occur with alarming frequency. These phrases, I think we will agree, are universal; their wooden quality is disheartening. It is easy to dismiss them as rote, but they are more than that, and worse.

Take, for example, one of these usages as employed by another of my students. Her class was asked to write a composition preferring, as a social type, either the celebrity or the ordinary person. She chose the latter, and wishing to add forcefulness to her argument that a life whose surfaces are less corruscated is more honestly scrubbed, referred several times in her essay to ordinary people as "the minority."[4] This misuse of language does not reveal some astonishing ignorance of social reality on the part of my student. When I asked her who were more numerous, movie stars and their ilk or people like ourselves, she knew the answer. Nor is the term she used foreign to her vocabulary; she

could easily define it. And, in fact, she blushed in confusion when I first called her attention to the mistake. But it is her very embarrassment that makes my point. Her language behavior was automatic and mindless--she blushed because she couldn't see how she could have made the mistake--and as such it was a verbal gesture belonging more to the structure of a situation than to the intellectual character of a person. It is a situation in which the allegedly specialized nature of writing abilities skews the social concerns learners are asked to have. Approaches to both appearing so much apart from normal activity that the students' eyes glaze, the immediate situation of writing becomes unreal. As we know, no one can believe in doing what has no reality. But students like the one cited above are compelled beyond belief. They therefore intuitively evade the demands of those in power--which here are to take a broad view of social relations--by adopting, however unconsciously, the classical strategy of smiling one to death, of yielding up the form but not the substance of what is sought. In this case, the form was sadly inappropriate; in others, it may appear to suit the occasion; but in all cases it is empty.

Still, even empty forms must be readily available for use. There must be a supply of prefabricated words and phrases, such as "the minority," and therefore of whatever ideas and rhetorical devices this language makes possible, that students can dip into with the assurance that they will

always produce uniform results. As such, this stock functions identically with that socially determined language context ESD students reenter out of disbelief. For both ESD and SE students, therefore, a certain kind of reversion offers resistance to learning. Passive resistance. Yet, we know that it is only by actively and clear-sightedly participating in real language situations that one can improve performance. And improved performance, which implies the discovery of new strategies and resources and the scrutiny of old ones for their possible dysfunction, is most effectively prompted by a firm belief in the value of the enterprise, since in the opposite state one clings to what is already known. For students trying to learn to write, what is already known is not the way of writing. Where, then, is that way? Or first, rather, where isn't it?

If disbelief in the value of literacy hinders acquisition of writing skills, creating the conditions for such belief to flourish is a sine qua non of teaching writing. I don't think it is cynical to say that we will not create those conditions by appeals to reason, to practicality, or to the idea of self-evident good. The professional bias we have as ideologues of the Word undermines the trust students in some more gracious time, might have placed in the claim that, as a process, writing has intrinsic value or that, as a product, it performs a redemptive function. Rejection of these notions might not occur, paradoxically, if there were some obvious correspondence--and I stress the word

obvious--between learning to write and the uses of literacy. That is, a desire for something is equal to a belief in the value of that thing. But this correspondence is not apparent to most students.

To make up for this lack, many colleges have devised the intramural solution of writing across the curriculum. This is a prescriptive term as currently used--writing will be applied, if not at work or in the home, then in school. As such, the policy represents strict conformance with pedagogical will. It opens the question, therefore, of whether compulsion and belief can be a happy pair. Belief, it seems to me, must at least have the appearance of arising from inside the learner so that the command to write is perceived as part of one's own natural response to the way things are, not as a lasso yanking one this way or that. The distinction, a fine enough one when we get down to cases, is one I will return to below; however, it is helpful to introduce at this point, since the idea of compulsion casts doubt not only on writing done in the schools but on the nature of extracurricular literacy programs as well. That is, though we assume such programs call for voluntary participation, and that voluntarism implies belief in some form, we must ask if the question is not begged quite often, in the way it obviously is in connection with the concept of a volunteer army, by various inducements and pressures to join. If it is, among enrolees as much possibility exists for the kind of

unconscious resistance to learning described above as it does among college students--who also, we should recall, have ostensibly signed on voluntarily--matriculating in regular fashion.

Neither coercion nor persuasion will be effective. I frankly consider the possibility of reforming American social practices and cultural norms, by addressing them directly, too absurd to contemplate. Yet, there must be some place, some situation, some set of conditions that make it possible for the writing that students do to be a "natural response." And there is. I suggest that we have for this purpose what we have always had: the writing classroom.

To approach, or reapproach, the connection between literacy and the classroom, it is necessary first to point again at the tendency of many students to draw back into parochial social and language contexts as a protective reaction to the demands learning to write makes upon them. As we have seen, these contexts--in which students revert to nonstandard usages or produce only the simulacra of analytic constructs--signal disbelief in the value of literacy and serve as centers of resistance to writing. To counter student withdrawal into such safe and comfortable domains, there would have to be in the classroom a learning situation from which retreat--or to put it another way, denial of value--is possible only to the extent that it is always idle to envision a completely leakproof system. That is, we must provide an entirely new context.

To imagine it, we may first recall the problem of compulsion and volition as they influence learning. Teachers cannot make students learn. And, as we have seen, self-will is an ambiguous concept, and therefore an unreliable one. Yet, academic and administrative constraints on the one hand and student initiative on the other are invariant, if sometimes conflictual, elements of all education; therefore, neither can be dismissed as a possible factor in any learning situation that we might contrive. By this admission I do not mean to imply, however, that we should attempt to adopt a few teaching practices that force compliance and a few that invite it, and hope by this compromise to establish an ideal balance in the classroom. Doing so is not to get off dead center. Rather, a new context should be one in which what people do and what is willed for them mesh too subtly to say that the reasons for acting can be attributed to this source rather than that one, or, in fact, that in expressing certain thoughts and following certain practices, people perform according to their own or others' wishes. As best the individual can tell, what happens happens and is thus self-justifying. If actual desire cannot be hoped for, such immanence is an important ground for belief in the value of what one does.

The advantages of a learning situation that answers to such a description are obvious. Still, it is reasonable to object that the necessary total immersion of a person in such a context, whether a context for learning or for anything

else, rarely can be effective. Consciousness must intervene to detach the participant, who then attempts to discover the reason for his or her current or expected behavior. In the classroom, therefore, the great likelihood of students' achieving some questioning distance would conceivably lead to a recrudescence of their original learning difficulties. But this is not a legitimate fear--the objection does not destroy the case I am making--if such self-removal from context is temporary and partial, the way it would be, for instance, for a bather who regularly wets each part of his or her body but always keeps some part out of [illegible]. This is the case with human culture. Habitually, within a cultural setting, as we do become conscious of motive or motivation in one place--say of why we esteem a particular art form--we bury awareness of it arising in another place--say of why we inquire into what we esteem. Then we perhaps reverse that procedure. Since we must operate in both places, though not necessarily in both at once, a compensatory principle of inclusion keeps us well within cultural bounds. The context for learning I feel is reasonable to propose, therefore, is one in which students relate to the social situation defined by the classroom as an individual relates to his or her general culture, one in which compulsion and volition are naturally conjoined to produce belief in value, and the individual is a natural member of a community of belief. Specifically, the culture I propose students relate to is a

culture of literacy.

Before detailing this concept, I must rehearse how value exists and is maintained in a culture. Value is a locus for belief. Belief means, in this case, that claims made for a value are true and that practices instantiating it are good. Within a culture, all values are related; none exists in isolation. Therefore, each value is not only confirmed by the action taken in its name but reinforced by actions taken in the name of other values. Challenges to belief in the verity or righteousness inherent in a value may be handed down, but if they are done so from within rather than from outside of the culture--as they always must be if the culture is sufficiently powerful to force its critics to stand at vantage points that it establishes--such challenges will not destroy or injure cultural integrity. Rather, if successful, they will produce change recognizable as outgrowths of original plantings.

When we speak of a culture of literacy, we are promoting literacy itself from its rank as one value among others to the superordinate position of a discrete culture. For this to happen, literacy must be broken down into component values which may be affirmed in practice. These components are readily apparent, I think. The first is the value that can be placed on literature--here, as explained below, imaginative literature--and the second is the value placed on language as it gains irreducible significance from its consistent

use. The actions affirming these values--and I think we can call them actions--are reading and writing.

Admittedly, this description may be so unsurprising it seems practically circular. But, as I hope to show, it actually does lead us to a new place. Some, however, may think it an old place. That is, experienced teachers will recognize immediately that a proposal to make imaginative literature and the language it calls forth basic to teaching writing puts back into the curriculum what has been, for the most part and over time, deliberately excluded from it. So, we have to consider a couple of questions. One, the most obvious, is whether we are teaching composition or literature; and, if composition, how it is distinguished from literary study. The other question, which I will take up first, is this: if a new curriculum is an attempt to solve old problems, can we see its newness by viewing something we could call a typical approach made to writing in the classroom?

My answer to this question is yes, and my reasoning is as follows. Most writing teachers are bound by an identical consideration that determines the general nature of what their students read and write about. This consideration, treated as a limit whose violation is self-defeating, is the prior experience and knowledge, or the lack of them, that students bring to their writing courses. It is not uncommon for students, especially early in a course, to narrate personal histories or to describe a scene in concrete detail or to relate

a process they themselves have observed or functioned within. Of course, students learning to write cannot long be confined to the entirely personal; they must learn to be objective and to handle abstract subjects. So they are asked, for instance, to compare and contrast items that figure importantly in the practical life of the "average" person, and to argue positions based on social and (less frequently) political matters reported in the newspapers, and to read about these in essay collections. These matters remain within the limit of the students' knowledge since they are in the public domain. But, unfortunately, it is the need to tie them to the students' experience--defined here as expressive capability--that makes the introduction of public issues in the writing classroom problematic.

The problem is that in order to comprehend these issues and to express meaningful opinions about them, students take their language as well as their ideas from others. Such borrowings compensate for a lack of personal and intellectual experience, but the inevitable result is a kind of leveling out in which students produce an almost timeless collection of cliches, stereotypes, prejudices, unexamined ideas, and reflexive attitudes. The issue, however, is not inferior thinking per se but the reference such thinking makes to social and language contexts at least analogous with those criticized previously, and sometimes identical with them (the possibility of identity increases, I imagine, to the extent one borrows

from sources most like oneself). If, as I have argued, retreat to these contexts entails a devaluation of literacy that impedes learning, teachers must assume a degree of responsibility for their students' failure.

So then must teachers forswear the common sense of utilizing the students' own experience and knowledge? I think not. Although we may need to jettison the usual approach, the formal principle guiding it may be salvaged. That principle is to meet students on their own ground. The condition for retaining the principle is that we ourselves define the ground. It follows that we should introduce in the classroom materials that become the only source, relevant to learning how to write, of what our students experience and come to know. Fiction--by which I mean novels, stories, folk tales, myths, drama, and poetry--can serve this purpose if students write only about what they read. For unlike other literatures (except, perhaps, for that of philosophy, hors de combat in this context) whose existence is justified solely by their reference to what lies outside them, imaginative literature and language have the potential to create a system whose self-enclosure and possibilities for internal referentiality make literacy into a distinct culture. For though we may imagine more than what we can read, we must base interpretation mainly on what is given; and if external experience is to be at all supplementary, it may be so only if it is drawn by analogy to an undeviating text. In this manner, the "expressive capability" so ill-

served by social issues used to generate writing is contained and controlled at the same time that it is enabled by the work at hand.

This description, however, must be enforced if such a writing course is not to be a literature course. In the latter, both the meaning of whole works and the interpretation of key elements are essential. Character, plot, and theme; narrative structure and dramatic form; verbal devices; the expression of literary theory, of major ideas, of social reality, of genre--these and more help us locate proper objects of study within any particular piece of writing submitted to literature students. However, for reasons that should be clear to all, these elements cannot provide the foci of courses in which the students' primary aim is to learn to write. In such courses, students may hardly be occupied in discovering the symbolism of Faulkner's bear or in tracing the origin of Eliot's crowned knot of fire (though the right combination of teaching concept formation in writing and comprehension in reading could bring the former task into view). But students might be directed, say, to compose a standard English version of the funeral oration in Baldwin's Go Tell It on the Mountain. And students could be asked to paraphrase Ransom's "Winter Remembered." Both are ways to address problems of language, and there are many other exercises possible to imagine.

Writing tasks could result from thus fragmenting or iso-

lating literary works. And they could contribute to teaching specific skills involving grammar, organization, rhetoric, or thinking. But also, and this is more to the point of this paper, a single work could be viewed as an all-embracing writing project, and therefore as a miniaturization of a culture of literacy, if from it came every writing task assigned for a part or the whole of a course.

From any literary work, as a classroom exercise, students could, for instance, be handed run-on and fragmentary sentences in a purposely distorted passage to correct and then asked to compare their versions with the original; or students might put back into a paragraph the punctuation that the instructor has removed from it. But to make these exercises ultimately worthwhile, an instructor would base them on the same discourse that more elaborate writing assignments addressed. If we were to use F. Scott Fitzgerald's story, "The Rich Boy," in addition to the above tasks, two others might be an essay employing causal analysis to trace the events responsible for Anson Hunter's unhappy final state and an essay arguing that the protagonist did or did not have a choice in the decisions he made in his life.

In this last example, but also in the others, and in any assignment that might arise from "The Rich Boy" or from a different selection, it is the evidence of the text, acting variously to shape writing but constantly defining performance (since the text itself is a universe), that becomes the

exclusive source of value in a writing course. Needing to hold values placed on literature and language in order to function at all is tantamount to a belief in literacy. Such belief does not guarantee success in learning; it does rule out students' sustained ability to withdraw to too familiar contexts and, by so doing, to resist learning. As a result, the different planes on which exist what is described above of student behavior, pedagogical methods, literary potentiality, and cultural facts combine, if I am correct in my analysis, to form a solid band of learning experience which we may safely call a culture of literacy.

Lewis Meyers
Hunter College

NOTES

1. "Functional literacy," for instance, describing an inability to perform such tasks as balancing a checkbook or filling out an employment application, is a normative term as used in the United States.

2. Writing in the New York Times, October 5, 1980, Gene I. Maeroff reports the continued nationwide decline of verbal skills as measured by the Scholastic Aptitude Test. One factor mentioned in the story as a possible cause of this decline is "relaxed academic standards."

3. I feel it is necessary to remark at this point, especially perhaps because problems relating to the oral mode and dialectal interference so clearly are involved in the example cited above, that I in no way expect that renewed belief in the value of literacy will be equivalent to the ability to write well.

4. It is interesting, in this regard, to note that women are so classified by affirmative action regulations.